

Train Wreck

Short story by Allison Fine

©2010

Part 1: Biographical

On the long train ride from Clark & Lake, downtown Chicago, to Irving Park (Blue Line) she noticed a twinge in the left arm. Nothing much. Pulled it probably at the Y when the trainer stepped up her usual work out and added a couple of reps. Marlene took pride in her hypochondria but even this didn't warrant much attention. Her iPod blasted Mahler's Symphony No. 1 conducted by that new hotshot L.A. kid Philharmonic conductor Gustavo Dudamel. Marlene reflected on what it would be like to be 28 years old and able to do something so monumental as to conduct a huge orchestra. In front of critics and consumers and stars and a bunch of Hollywood hyped up weirdoes who wouldn't know Mahler from Mussorgsky anyway, but suddenly waxed intellectually curious and intelligent about Beethoven and the unfinished 10th symphony Mahler left before he died! God. Marlene hated the whole world at that moment. There was nothing (that she could see) so great about being a late bloomer. Being young and incredibly happy was all there was, right? or maybe old and rich; old, rich and a man, with a string of lovers behind and a dutiful wife in front—or beside—whatever.

She was not young. Sixty had come and gone without much flare or celebration. She had two rooms (paid for by the loving daughter) and a part time telemarketing job, food stamps and the ability to attend expensive theatre for free

thanks to her good job selling season subscriptions to 3 major Chicago theatres. This time it was *Chicago Shakespeare* that put her sales reward on a platter offering up Richard III. An evening to remember, she smiled; a journey well worth the candle.

Something about the effort it took to keep her attention on the stage, on the play, on the story, on the characters, and not notice the strained, awful vocal machinations of the actress playing Queen Elizabeth, or the odd mixture of accents—the terrible thing American actors do to mangle Shakespeare, (she thought) I mean, get it right! Either have everyone do a straight English accent or everyone do American! But some of the smaller parts had actors who, while handsome and dashing and moving about the stage with flair, could hardly speak, whereas the larger parts had seasoned actors doing their version of Elizabethan English dialect, bodies worn smooth with many years of exercise—(you could see the back muscles ripping on the torso of Lady Anne—a kind of musculature that Marlene was absolutely sure no woman had in Elizabethan times—I mean—come on! Did they have weight toning machines then? Other than for torture?) –No consistency! The costumes were great, however, and she loved Richard, played the traditional way with the limp and the hump, a certain sly, humorous, diabolical nastiness to him that she savored. Three hours went by rather fast, she reckoned, the audience was calm and friendly, the seats excellent and comfortable and after the whole thing was over she congratulated herself on going on this rather tedious but interesting journey. Thank God it's over! She thought but still—glad she went through it. Mostly because of Shakespeare and the language and the story and the characters—it was Shakespeare taking her along on the journey and thank you to

the actors and the theatre for making it, while not transcendent or glorious, certainly palatable.

The twinge in her arm interrupted her thoughts as the train slowed down then lurched past Damon. Sometimes on late nights like this (hardly late, really, just 10:30, but at sixty 10:30 is late) she wondered what it would feel like to be the demographic that was *so* Chicago: thirty-five and hip and young and glad to be alive, working at some corporate gig that was not much fun but paid really well and made life affordable—the new boots, a wonderful colorful Ralph Lauren bag or some great, textured tights—clubbing, laughing with friends—she had never been a city girl! Not much.

By twenty-nine she had three kids and a house in a blue-collar suburb of a loathsome ugly town in Michigan. The town was big enough, her family was there, she'd grown up there, but it was such a dead end! Little did she care then—playing two nights in a club, (*The Olde Worlde Café* where she was billed as the hip and rousing singer-songwriter who played the piano and got people up and dancing with her “show tunes.” *what show tunes?*) raising kids without a care for finances since Dad picked up the tab, life was creative and fun—she always knew once the kids were grown that she could pursue that elusive career as a writer and musician she'd always dreamed up. And so, here she was at sixty, the education completed (finally) the career elusive as always, poverty, hopelessness—the dismal failure of bad decisions and a life wasted. (So she came to the conclusion as the train stopped at California and Western).

That arm, that arm was hurting now; more than a twinge. Bad digestion, she concluded. Affected her everywhere. IBS—the curse of control freaks with no control over life. Meditation. That was the antidote, she decided. She'd meditate here on the train while watching out the darkened windows and listening to the cell phone conversation of the girl behind her.

The ellipsis of time had become the staple of her life. Mornings, noons; nights, weekends....

-I don't care what he said about her he's lying. She's lying too. They're all thinking they can put the wool over my eyes, but I've been very careful—you know—yeah—I've watched the scene. She's not as pretty as she thinks she is. Yeah. No. I know. But still—well, maybe in high school but come on! She's thirty! OK. Twenty-eight? She's lying. Really...

Marlene hated cell phones for the intrusion they permitted in public places. Really, there was no privacy anywhere. Forced into riding buses and trains when the economy crashed and she crashed with it, she gave up her car and told everyone she was going green. Well, to be truthful, there was a certain pride in being sixty and living in 2 rooms and not driving—it was a statement.

However, she knew the truth of the matter—if it weren't for her daughter she'd still be in the shelter system, shuffling around from one desperate handout to another; spilling her lying guts out to social workers who gave a damn about her as much as her coke-addicted shelter-mates.

She'd spent her entire adult life thinking motherhood was a vocation and suddenly in her fifties she had no vocation. But truth: she really always wanted to

live her life like all the male artists she admired. She admired them because she wanted to be them, but as a woman, she hated them too because of the cavalier way they used women and wives as muses and back ups and support systems and cooks and cleaners and baby minders and watchers and secretaries—women were chattels to them--in some cases, worse! They were maids, only to be discarded and replaced by some younger version! Women just could not live their lives like that, she realized—and then there was middle age. She became middle aged at thirty-three, she reckoned. It was all over. How could you be an adventurous artist with three kids and a tacky-tacky 3-bedroom house in a blue-collar suburb of a hideous Michigan town? She tried her best anyway, while doing the laundry, the shopping the cooking, the carting back and forth to violin and dance and forty-seven came and went when she got the last kid out the door and ran off to the mountains of the west. West of the Continental Divide: *in das Berge das blou ze...*there you feel free!

Back to school in her fifties because no one would publish her work and she wanted to find out: *what am I doing wrong?* The trick was to train her writing to be professional and dense and complex and deep—it was. But no one was buying it. They weren't buying her lyrical jazz-like dreamy songs either, (in her fifties, fifty-four, fifty-five, fifty six—how glad she was when she got into grad school NOW, she said to herself, NOW I am going to be a winner!), she lost the weight, she gained the weight; overweight, middle aged, unattractive except to wimpy washed out men who claimed on their profiles that they were *sensitive* and *good listeners* or heavy guys in their fifties who had two ex-wives and a lot of marital baggage, or the men

who told her they liked “overweight women.” Even when she lost the weight for a season and got thin and beautiful, the pickings were slim: the Native American jazz pianist, something Redhouse was his name? A recovering alcoholic living in his father’s basement with no car; or the male nurse who lived in his friend’s caravan and had developed a new vitamin for eternal youth; the 5’2” chemist who had never had sex. *What’s wrong with the world?* Her dreams of life after life were colliding with reality and it was not a pretty sight!

There was no place to go anymore. It was the realization that life was a one-way street and she was nearing the end of the street. No turnarounds.

At Logan Square she felt a wave of nausea that was terrible, like she was about to throw up and in fact, she decided to get off at Logan Square, throw up in the McDonald’s bathroom near the station and walk over to her daughter’s place. Something didn’t feel right. Where are my keys? She felt inside the voluminous black Target bag for her house keys, finally finding them toward the bottom with her transit card. I am sick, she thought. *Maybe I’ll die*, she thought with newfound hope.

Ingmar Bergman was her touchstone. The man had demons, so did she. He needed muses (interchangeable, moving, ever shifting—slotting various beautiful, gorgeous, strong, creative women into the place of muse—women who saw their creativity realized in the body of a man) not her! She had her own male muses! She wrote an essay for her *Creative Non-Fiction* class in graduate school: *Stalking The Male Muse*—first it was Richard Burton, (ten to twelve) then Paul McCartney, (fifteen to twenty) then Robert de Niro, (thirties) then Al Pacino, (ditto) then Robert

Redford, (forties) then John McCain (that was a weird, politically charged creative phase) (fifties) and then Gabriel Byrne; (now!), all famous Alpha males that lighted her sexual fantasies and charged her creative output. Problems came when she tried to make the muses into real people and go find them! As if that could be done. She realized that her art required an inner muse, or a real guy—one or both simultaneously.

Where is my muse? She shouted in the train. *Now I'm becoming like that crazy woman who sits in Logan Square station on the bench surrounded with 15 bags talking to herself all day and all night.* The woman had been there for three months, and now, suddenly, she was gone. Marlene feared someone had gotten rid of her, told her to move on, committed her or something, who knows?

The fact is, she realized, that her entire life was mostly now behind her and it all looked like a monumental train wreck. In fact, even the kids saw that. The other day she had a wonderful lunch with the oldest daughter, the one supporting her financially and otherwise, and saw the girl actually looking at her with love and some sort of admiration. She thanked the daughter for all her help. *I've learned so much from you*, she told her, reminding herself that role reversals happened all the time. *Have you learned anything from me?* *Yeah*, said the beautiful daughter, as she got out her credit card to pay the tab, *what not to do*.

Oy, Marlene comprehended, *I am now example of **what not to do***. It hurt, even if it was true or not true depending on your perspective. That was the day she lost her keys, found the lifetime membership card to The Art Institute and killed a large

black beetle escaping from underneath her bathroom sink. It was a full life, one could suppose, even if it was filled with damp rooms and cold expectations.

On one otherwise deadly night, she had walked through the glistened rain soaked street to her gated apartment building. Four strange looking men loitered outside the gate wearing hoodies and ugly pants with inadequate shoes, but she knew then, somehow that in spite of whatever crappy deals they might be doing, it had nothing to do with her and wouldn't affect her life. Now she hurtled through the night on this train, with some kind of mental confusion entering her brain in spite of an effort to take a linear position of rationality. Nothing worked. She felt the twinge in her left arm as if it belonged to someone else, and a curious sense of detachment washed through her, as if life were delivered up to her in a foreign language; a language not just from another country but maybe from another planet.

At Logan Square she took the escalator up to the street. It was a dark and cold night threatening to rain. This fall had been nothing but rain; Chicago this year had been denied the promise of Indian summer. There were few brilliant, colorful fall days—it was all one gloomy, rain soaked day after another. *Thank God for the Marc Jacob boots*, she thought, (and the collection of umbrellas hanging on her bathroom door).

Living in Chicago was boot camp for the elderly, she supposed, and she included herself in this dubious group even though some thought she looked younger than her age. Anything over sixty is elderly, she surmised, without much regret. The weather was horrendous most of the time, public transportation was

slow and inadequate at best, and not that cheap, everyone or most everyone had a car anyway, except the very young, the twenty-somethings and poor people like her; they either moved too fast or too slow, some were busy in this city of commerce, but there were many who seemed not busy enough. The winters, filled with inordinate amounts of snow, wet, icy, cold, chilling to the bone, spring rain and more rain, summer was lovely except for the week or two of inevitable heat wave accompanied with homicidal humidity—she found herself always sweating in Chicago, no matter what the season! Her two rooms were too hot in the winter when the radiator heat kicked in and she had to keep a window open—she'd wake up in January sweating, throwing the covers off, lurching into the kitchen for a glass of filtered water (courtesy of Walgreen's Brita Water Filter) sweating in the spring with the temperature going up and down and up and down, sweating through the summer when the heat rose up to the 90's and the humidity made it feel like a tropical urban jungle, sweated in the fall—*Chicago: the city that sweats*, she concluded, *everyone sure sweats for a living here*, she thought, leaning over the garbage can on the corner of Milwaukee and Sawyer throwing up the gutless insides of her gut into the can filled with newspapers, Styrofoam cups, newspaper ads, plastic water bottles coated with fishbone—who knows? and other bad smelling garbage.

My depression 101, she thought, now feeling much better. A sigh heaved up from the deep reaches off her bowels, growing into an expansive cry that echoed out of her like a wailing ghost that had returned from dead to the wrong place. She was bent onto her knees, crying, screaming and laughing simultaneously.

Are you all right?

She looked up to see a youngish man in a dark green long coat slinging a gorgeous deep plum leather briefcase over his right shoulder.

I'm fine! She shouted at him, a little too loudly.

Do you want some help?

*I'm going to visit my daughter on St. Louis. I'll be—I'll be—*she tried for the word *fine* but just could not get it out.

St. Louis is kinda far from here, isn't it? Missouri?

Why don't people understand shit? Marlene thought as his hand came under her arm, lifting her up. She realized as she got to her feet just how bad she really was. The thought of making the five blocks or so to Wrightwood and St. Louis seemed insurmountable.

I'll be fine. I can make it there.

He nodded. *All right. But I can call an ambulance if you want. You don't look—*

Oh, no—no need for that. I have a cell phone anyway.

Okay. He figured she was on her way down the steps to the O'Hare train to get to the airport to fly to St. Louis, Missouri. But she wasn't following and he had an appointment at Dearborn Street Oyster bar and while this appointment was pleasure, not business, he knew it could be business and pleasure as well. The woman was about forty and had a growing cell distribution company; she was CEO. In these days--

He left. Mercifully. With his thoughts trailing down the stairs behind him; down the steps to the station. Thank God she was alone on this nasty, rainy night. She began to round the corner to Milwaukee, so she could walk to Kimball and

negotiate her way to Wrightwood toward her daughter's place. Somehow she knew she wouldn't be making it that far.

There are many ways that people die. Some people die in peace, though very few, some die by surprise, quite a few, and some die somewhere in between. This was Marlene's death. At least, that's is what the thinker was thinking. Even in this state, she knew somehow that *the thinker* and his thinking were separate from her. Perhaps his gender was indeterminate, but she intrinsically felt two things about this:

- 1) It didn't matter.
- 2) It was beyond gender.
- 3) She referred to the thinker as "he."

The rain fell a bit harder as she sank onto the blessed sidewalk with relief. So glad to know it was all over. Her black Target bag sat on her hip as her body turned on its side. She felt the sidewalk and the rain as if there were warmth coming up from the earth to greet her. So glad to know she could rest at last.

Her life, she concluded, just as a warm feeling passed through her cold body, had been a train wreck anyway.

Part 2: The Whiteness of the Room

What life really was had never been explained to Lyle. He moved noiselessly about the room, his large, 6'4" three hundred-pound frame finding a balletic sequence of events and movements mastered over many years of practice. He was not a yogi or a master of any kind, he was that sort of worker that is large, looming and invisible simultaneously. His blue scrubs were wrinkled, spattered with blood from the patient in #4 with acute bloody diarrhea. Looking down into the pasty white visage of Marlene, he saw her puffy cheeks, the bruise on the left eye from the fall and the scrape on her cheek, her arms, dangling over the side of the gurney which he placed respectfully at either side of her on the bed.

Hello, I'm Lyle, he shouted into her closed eyes and swollen face. Marlene heard: *Below! You're style!* And did not respond. It was one of those strange dreams that she often had where people spoke a language she had never heard and there were energies floating in fourth dimensional space, which she had no concept of in three dimensional reality. And *he* was the thinker and had been monitoring the perception of so-called linear reality since Marlene, *the doer*, had, in a sense, checked out. However, Marlene, *the doer*, (*and the thinker I might add! said the doer in her own dimension to the thinker*) was making her own observations and shouting them out in some kind of nursery rhyme; a nonsensical way, but it was her way alone at this time.

Groaning, moving her head from side to side. The room, sterile, white, the ceiling pricked with a whiteness that mirrored the walls, the trash receptacles, the

sink, the paper towel dispenser and the paper towels, the rolls of wrapped toilet tissue stacked on the counter next to the sink, the floor, white too, with a red and green stripe leading to X-Rays or Oncology or some other department, if you followed them, if you knew which color led to where; the exactness of the gurney with the tight white sheets, the pumping mechanism to raise it higher or lower, the terrible glaring light—couldn't someone dim the light?

The Light, The Light, Maureen called out but Lyle heard: *Lie, Lie*.

Sorry honey, can't understand you. Doctor will be here soon.

They say heart attack quite easily but few people talk about brain attack. The cerebral accident that changed Maureen's world flipped her upside down on a stretcher in an ambulance with a siren moving down Milwaukee toward Swedish Covenant Hospital emergency on California where the "science of feeling better" was put into practice by well-meaning doctors, nurses, staff—the incredibly alternate world of the thousands of people who run the busy hive of hospital life that is dedicated less toward the convenience of patients or their comfort than toward the convenience of scientific practitioners who like things fast, white, light airy and easy to get at. *If we are going to perform scientific miracles*, Dr. Marty Peterson was heard to say, *we can't let the patients get in the way*. To be sure, this was at a private meeting of primary care physicians who had been hand-picked to serve on the committee, there was wine served, it was a catered buffet—he could be excused for that one sliver of a moment of honest revelation.

It meant nothing to Marlene.

Lyle dumped a wad of paper lining into the trashcan and let the lid slam down with a lively ping onto the metal surface it covered. *There are some doctors who really care*, he thought with a shard of guilt. The beetle's outer wing scurried out of the room, as admirably as a 6'4" 300 pound man can scurry, leaving Marlene alone with an IV in her left arm and a terrible dream erupting and unfolding without her ability to grasp it's meaning. *Any time now I'll wake up, she thought, but who was doing the thinking now? The dreamer, the doer or just Marlene!* She could not even move her arms and her legs were stiff and dead like tree trunks at the end of her body.

Thrombolytic had been given, tPA to be exact, to control the clotting mechanism and someone had ordered Coumadin when they rolled her in from the ambulance.

You've had a hemorrhagic stroke, we're going into surgery to remove the pooled blood from the brain and repair any damaged blood vessels. From the CTA scan I'm looking at the Amygdala here as the location of the hemorrhage but we won't know for sure until we operate.

I'm going to die, Maureen thought. *Better call the kids. No. They'll groan. I'm a vegetable already. The lights! The lights!*

The lights are bright, aren't they? Dr. Susan Bergot had learned to understand the mis-understandable after only a few years treating stroke patients. *We'll be medicating you soon to get ready for the operation so you won't be seeing those lights much longer.* The medical student in attendance began prepping Maureen for the pre-op anesthetic.

The kids, two daughters and a son, arrived after Maureen had been in surgery for almost five hours. The son had had to get a flight from New York. The girls came from opposite ends of Chicago, the youngest a medical student herself at UIC hospital. The oldest had to get a friend to take the dog because her husband was out of town and no one knew how long she'd be in the hospital. Her mother had had a stroke.

If it's the Amygdala we're done, thought the youngest.

The whiteness of the room; a cloudy day outside the window; white snow tumbling down in large flakes, some of it sticking to the window, bells, televisions, laughter, moans, conversation, fear rising up and down like waves. Maureen watched it all. She was too drugged up to feel panic—it swelled inside of her but died a small death as soon as it tried to reach the outside world. No one could see her; she was cold. Only a thin blanket and a small sheet covering her legs and torso. How to get warm?

Someone who saw beyond the blood pooling in her brain; understood her to be something more or other than a series of symptomatic behaviors signaling a need for science and medical intervention, someone other than the three children pooled into a clutch of energy outside the room in the hallway, the youngest checking her iPhone for messages, the oldest doing the same, the son standing ceremoniously off to the side wondering and observing the intersection of fate and reality—this someone, Jay something-or-other, a third year medical student, took a clean blue

blanket from the inside cupboard and placed it around Marlene's legs and torso. The warm, clean woolen fabric warmed her entire being.

Warmth was the antidote to cold, she reflected. *I can think!* The doer thought, while the *thinker lay dormant, silent, I am waiting, waiting, waiting*, so were the words that came from somewhere to nowhere and back to somewhere.

This was only one day.

There would be others.

The *doer* and the *thinker* were in sync now, even though the outside world had no knowledge of it.

-